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Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force for the period from 18 November 2016 to 1 March 2017

I. Introduction

1. The present report gives an account of the activities of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) during the past three months, pursuant to the mandate contained in Security Council resolution 350 (1974) and extended in subsequent resolutions, most recently resolution 2330 (2016).

II. Situation in the area of operation and activities of the Force

2. During the reporting period, the ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic was maintained, albeit in a volatile environment attributable to the ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. This is notwithstanding a number of violations of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces (Disengagement of Forces Agreement) of 1974, which are set out below. The Syrian Arab Armed Forces and non-State armed opposition groups engaged in exchanges of heavy weapon fire in the area of separation and the area of limitation. Different armed groups, including the listed terrorist group Jabhat Fath al-Sham (formerly Nusrah Front)[1] and Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade/Khalid ibn al-Walid Army,[2] which pledged allegiance to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also continued to exchange fire in the UNDOF area of operation. Inside the area of separation, the presence of the Syrian armed forces and military equipment, as well as any other armed personnel and military equipment other than that of UNDOF, is in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. As underscored again by the Security Council in its resolution 2330 (2016), there should be no military activity of any kind in the area of separation.

[1] In July 2016, the Nusrah Front announced that it had changed its name to Jabhat Fath al-Sham and declared that it had cut ties with Al-Qaida.

[2] The merger between the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade and Harakat al Muthana was initially announced on 12 April 2016. On 24 May 2016, open sources reported that both groups were now operating under the umbrella name of "Khalid ibn al-Walid Army". The grouping is assessed as being ISIL-affiliated.

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3. In employing its best efforts to maintain the ceasefire and see that it is scrupulously observed, as prescribed in the Disengagement of Forces Agreement, UNDOF reports all breaches of the ceasefire line that it observes. All incidents of firing into the area of separation and across the ceasefire line, as well as the crossing of the ceasefire line by individuals, are violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. In his regular interaction with both sides, the Head of Mission and Force Commander of UNDOF continued to call upon both parties to exercise restraint and prevent any miscalculations that might lead to an escalation of the situation. This was particularly the case when responding to incidents of spillover and retaliatory fire.

4. Incidents of spillover and retaliatory fire across the ceasefire line decreased significantly during the reporting period. On 27 November 2016, the Israel Defense Forces reported to the Head of Mission and Force Commander of UNDOF that Israel Defense Forces personnel had received small arms fire across the ceasefire line from the area of separation in the vicinity of former United Nations position 86. The Israel Defense Forces responded with an airstrike across the ceasefire line, which reportedly killed four members of the responsible group, named as Khalid ibn al-Walid Army according to the Israel Defense Forces and open sources. A further airstrike was reportedly conducted in the early hours of 28 November. UNDOF could not observe the point of origin or point of impact of either of the airstrikes, the latter of which reportedly impacted in the vicinity of United Nations position 86.

5. On 8 February 2017, it was reported by open media that an incident of spillover fire had occurred on the Israeli-occupied Golan and that the Israel Defense Forces had taken subsequent action by firing across the ceasefire line. UNDOF did not observe the incident and was unable to confirm the report. Following liaison by UNDOF leadership, the Israel Defense Forces confirmed on 9 February that they had fired across the ceasefire line in response to spillover fire that had occurred the day before. The Senior Syrian Arab Delegate confirmed an impact in the vicinity of Baath and was adamant that the spillover had not been caused by the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. No further details regarding the incident, origin of the spillover fire or point of impact of the fire across the ceasefire line have been provided to UNDOF by the Israel Defense Forces to date. The issue of spillover fire remains a serious cause of concern for UNDOF as it could result in escalation between the parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement.

6. The berm, or earthwork, in the area of separation remained a concern for UNDOF throughout the reporting period. The berm is over 2 kilometres long and appears to be facilitating movement in the corridor between Hamidiyah al-Jadidah and Jabata al-Khashab. The berm crosses the ceasefire line in at least one location and is used by armed groups, thus making the area of separation a target for the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. This continues to have the potential to draw fire, particularly indirect fire, closer to the ceasefire line and the technical fence.

7. Crossing of the ceasefire line by civilians, primarily shepherds, from the Bravo side to the Alpha side continued to be observed almost daily. Instances of interaction between Israel Defense Forces soldiers and individuals from the Bravo side have increased from the previous reporting period. On 30 November, UNDOF observed five persons loading a vehicle with unknown goods approximately 40 metres east of the Israeli technical fence gate in the vicinity of United Nations

observation post 54. On 7 December, UNDOF observed a brief interaction between Israel Defense Forces personnel in an armoured vehicle, who opened the technical fence and a white pickup truck that moved from Mu'allaqah and crossed the ceasefire line from the Bravo side to the Alpha side. After the brief interaction with the Israel Defense Forces, the occupant(s) of the white vehicle crossed back into the area of separation and moved towards Mu'allaqah.

8. UNDOF also observed a number of interactions between the Israel Defense Forces and individuals from the Bravo side that involved Israel Defense Forces armoured and soft-skinned vehicles; as well as trucks, ambulances and/or stretchers from the Bravo side. Although the exact nature of these interactions could not be confirmed, they appeared to suggest the provision of medical assistance. Such incidents occurred at night on 13 December and on 9, 15 and 18 January.

9. There has also been increased interaction between Israel Defense Forces soldiers and individuals from the Bravo side on Mount Hermon during the reporting period. These incidents involved individuals with vehicles and mules from the Bravo side loading unidentified objects during interaction with the Israel Defense Forces on 6 January and on 5 and 21 February. On 17 January and 17 February, in addition to the transfer of unidentified objects from the Israel Defense Forces to the persons from the Bravo side, the interaction involved the transfer to the Israel Defense Forces of an individual on a stretcher. UNDOF also observed movement of five individuals on 20 February and two individuals on 28 February from the Bravo side to the Alpha side after interaction with Israel Defense Forces on Mount Hermon.

10. It is of note that similar movement of unarmed unidentified persons with varying numbers of unloaded mules was also observed from Mount Hermon by UNDOF personnel on 12, 19, 20 and 22 January. Notably, UNDOF observed that, on the return routes, the mules had been loaded; however, no interaction by the unidentified persons with the Israel Defense Forces was observed by UNDOF on those occasions. The increase in interaction is a concerning trend because of the strategic importance of the Mount Hermon complex. From its observation, UNDOF cannot confirm or verify the nature of the interaction described in the paragraphs above. The Israel Defense Forces have insisted that the interactions were of a humanitarian and medical nature. On occasion, unidentified armed elements were also observed during such interactions. As previously reported by UNDOF, there is a concern that such interaction heightens the risk of clashes between the armed groups and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, including on Mount Hermon.

11. On 5 January, a civilian (a shepherd) sustained serious injuries to his right leg following a mine incident on the Bravo side in the vicinity of United Nations observation post 73. Following immediate first aid and stabilization by UNDOF personnel, the shepherd was medically evacuated to the Alpha side, where he continues to receive medical care. The positive and speedy reaction of the Israel Defense Forces and the trauma care of the Israeli medical services is highly commended and undoubtedly saved his life. UNDOF will oversee his return to the Bravo side when his medical condition permits such a move.

12. In the context of the ongoing Syrian conflict, combat in the northern part of the area of separation and area of limitation on the Bravo side continued in the vicinity of Tall Hamariyah, also known as the "Castle", and Hadar. Tall Hamariyah

was captured by armed groups on 10 September and remains contested. A spike occurred on 19-20 November when the Syrian Arab Armed Forces advanced through the southern villages of Hadar and reportedly captured Tal al Naqar from armed groups. There was a further slight spike in combat on 15 January, which suggested that fluctuations in the intensity of the fighting remain prevalent.

13. The level of transborder movements decreased from the previous reporting period, with 16 recorded instances in November, 3 in December and none in January. It is assessed that the decrease in combat and movement in the Mount Hermon complex is related to the onset of winter weather conditions.

14. In the central area of the area of separation and area of limitation on the Bravo side, kinetic military activity remained at low levels between armed groups and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, albeit with consistent reports of direct and indirect firing. Firing continues to be observed along the front lines in the vicinity of Syrian Arab Armed Forces positions towards positions held by armed groups in south Gharbiyah, Al Qunaytirah and Umm Batinah and the contested area of Samdaniyah.

15. There were also frequent reports of movement of armed groups and observation of their equipment in the area of separation. A T55 main battle tank, a multiple launch rocket system BM-21, a technical vehicle mounted with an anti-aircraft weapon and two D30 towed artillery pieces were reported in the areas of Hamidiyah al-Jadidah, Al Qunaytirah and Qahtaniyah during the reporting period.

16. In the southern part of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side, which remain for the most part under the control of armed groups, clashes continued between the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army on one side and the Free Syrian Army and the Nusrah Front on the other. Significant spikes in military activity were observed on 28, 29 and 30 November and again, between 3 and 7 January, in the area of limitation on the Bravo side.

17. UNDOF protested all violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement to both parties, including the presence of unauthorized equipment in the area of separation and firing into that area. The Head of Mission and Force Commander reminded the parties of their obligation to abide by the terms of the Agreement and to ensure the safety and security of United Nations personnel on the ground.

18. During the reporting period, on several occasions, United Nations personnel observed persons on the Bravo side unearthing and removing mines in close proximity to United Nations positions. On 20 November and 20, 22 and 23 January, United Nations personnel at observation post 54 observed persons, assessed to be shepherds or other civilians, searching the ground and digging up items. On two occasions, on 22 and 23 January, the persons were observed emptying the explosive content from mines and carrying the empty containers away. On 22 November, United Nations personnel at observation posts 51 and 53 observed four persons in the vicinity of each location digging and collecting objects from the ground. On 26 January, United Nations personnel at observation post 53 observed two unarmed men digging in a minefield. The individuals removed six brown circular-shaped items from the field and returned to the area of separation in an easterly direction.

19. During the reporting period, UNDOF observed seven locations where 410 tents and other structures had been set up for internally displaced persons in the area of separation and in proximity to that area. The number of people in the camps

could not be ascertained and appeared to fluctuate. The camp east of Burayqah village in the central part of the area of separation increased from approximately 230 tents to 272 tents, huts and containers of various sizes. Owing to the closure of the established crossing point at Al Qunaytirah between the Alpha and Bravo sides since late August 2014, UNDOF remains unable to facilitate, in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross, humanitarian crossings, including for students, between the two sides.

20. Since its temporary relocation from a number of positions in September 2014 and pending its full return to the area of separation, UNDOF has continued to maintain visibility of that area and the ceasefire line from its positions on Mount Hermon, position 80 in the southern part of the area of separation and position 22 on the Alpha side. UNDOF operations continued to be supported by United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) military observers in Observer Group Golan, who maintained five fixed and four temporary observation posts along the Alpha line. The focus of the activities of the Group was on continuous static observation and situational awareness. Observer Group Golan-Damascus suspended the maintenance of temporary observation posts on Mount Hermon owing to the severe winter conditions in December 2016. Operations are expected to resume in spring 2017.

21. Through Observer Group Golan, UNDOF continued to carry out fortnightly inspections of equipment and force levels in the area of limitation on the Alpha side. Liaison officers from the Alpha side accompanied the inspection teams. Inspections in the area of limitation on the Bravo side remained suspended because of the security situation. As in the past, UNDOF has faced some instances of restriction on its freedom of movement. UNDOF continues to engage with the Israel Defense Forces in an effort to reduce the delays and challenges experienced by United Nations personnel in crossing through the technical fence to United Nations observation posts and positions.

22. During the reporting period, United Nations personnel observed 155 mm artillery weapons on the Alpha side within 10 kilometres of the ceasefire line on 22, 23 and 24 November and 5 December. Repeatedly throughout the reporting period, United Nations personnel observed a multiple-rocket launching system and Iron Dome systems at locations within the 10 and 20 kilometre zones in the area of limitation on the Alpha side.

23. UNDOF, in consultation with both parties, continued to review the situation in the area of separation to assess whether the conditions on the ground permitted an incremental return to vacated positions in that area. In this regard, UNDOF conducted a reconnaissance mission to some former United Nations positions and observation posts on the Bravo Side on 17 February and 21 February visiting Camp Faouar and United Nations position 25 in Khan Arnabah and United Nations observation post 56 near Jaba. The situation in the area was calm and usual day-to-day activities were observed, with security measures being ensured by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic. Observation post 56 was found occupied by the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. The UNDOF Head of Mission and Force Commander also continues his frequent visits and inspections of Camp Faouar and Mount Hermon on the Bravo side.

24. During the reporting period, UNDOF has continued to advance the limited return to Bravo side operations in line with its phased plan. Since UNDOF redeployed to Camp Faouar on 14 November, work has progressed satisfactorily and working and living conditions for UNDOF personnel at the Camp have improved steadily, in line with the Mission support plan. From an operational perspective, the security and defence of the Camp have been continuously practised and all deployed elements have been integrated into a cohesive and effective component with clear command and control. Construction of key infrastructure and accommodation has continued, kitchens have been established and ablution units installed. Previously available water sources have been refurbished, guaranteeing supply, and regular deliveries of food and provisions are taking place, enabling day-to-day subsistence in the camp and the building of strategic reserves.

25. After the winter, the Nepalese armoured personnel carriers currently deployed at Camp Faouar will conduct a handover to a newly generated mechanized infantry company and then redeploy to strengthen the Mount Hermon complex. This new mechanized company will give UNDOF the protected mobility and capacity to commence patrols around and beyond Camp Faouar, conditions permitting.

26. Following the first five months of deployment, no adverse reaction to the return of UNDOF to Camp Faouar has been perceived. There has been no increase in combat or threat surrounding the camp and UNDOF assesses that no deliberate actions have been taken by any armed group to threaten the presence of UNDOF on the Bravo side. This positive assessment is tempered by acknowledging the overall low to medium levels of activity in the areas of separation and limitation during this period. The Mission will continue to monitor the situation and ensure that force protection and the safety and security of UNDOF personnel remain a primary consideration.

27. In accordance with the provisions of Security Council resolution 2330 (2016), efforts continued to deploy appropriate technology, including counter-improvised explosive device (IED) capabilities and a sense and warn system, to ensure the safety and security of UNDOF personnel and equipment. With regard to counter-IED technology, UNDOF capability requirements for new units specify the requirement for jammers for armoured vehicles. In parallel, the Mission's approach includes reliance on tactics, techniques and procedures to combat specific IED threats in the UNDOF area of operations. Options to deploy sense and warn technology as contingent-owned equipment were explored with various troop-contributing countries, but have not been successful thus far. The Department of Field Support, in consultation with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and UNDOF, is evaluating the viability of commercial options to meet Mission-specific technical requirements. Acquisition and deployment will follow appropriate consultations with the parties. UNDOF has approached the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Government of Israel to permit deployment of sense and warn and counter-IED capabilities. A response is pending from both sides.

28. UNDOF continued to resupply its positions on Mount Hermon and Camp Faouar from Damascus. UNDOF convoys between Damascus and the United Nations positions were conducted almost daily and with an UNDOF security escort, accompanied by a liaison officer from the office of the Senior Syrian Arab Delegate. UNDOF continued to carry out contingency planning for the reinforcement and

evacuation of United Nations positions and observation posts and to update its contingency planning for the relocation and evacuation of United Nations personnel on both the Alpha and Bravo sides, as well as in Damascus. UNDOF, through its Force Reserve Company, conducted regular rehearsals, exercises and training for all identified contingencies. UNDOF and the Observer Group Golan continued regular evacuation and reinforcement exercises and contingency planning. The implementation of risk mitigation, including force protection measures recommended in the military capability study of UNDOF conducted in October 2015, continued at observation posts, positions and the operational base at Camp Ziouani.

29. As at 1 March, UNDOF comprised 830 troops, including 33 women. Troops are currently deployed from Bhutan (2), Czechia (3), Fiji (299), Finland (2), India (203), Ireland (136), Nepal (183) and the Netherlands (2). In addition, 72 military observers from UNTSO, including 8 female observers, assisted the Force in carrying out its tasks.

III. Implementation of Security Council resolution 338 (1973)

30. In its resolution 2330 (2016), the Security Council called upon the parties concerned to implement immediately its resolution 338 (1973), decided to renew the mandate of UNDOF for a further period of six months, until 30 June 2017, and requested me to report every 90 days on developments in the situation and the measures taken to implement resolution 338 (1973). The search for a peaceful settlement in the Middle East, in particular the efforts made at various levels to implement resolution 338 (1973), was addressed in my report on the situation in the Middle East (A/71/328), submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 70/16 on Jerusalem and 70/17 on the Syrian Golan.

31. Since the discontinuation of indirect peace talks in December 2008, there have been no negotiations between the parties. The Syrian conflict is further reducing the prospects for their resumption and for progress towards peace between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic. I look forward to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and the resumption of efforts towards a comprehensive, just and durable peace settlement, as called for by the Security Council in its resolution 338 (1973) and other relevant resolutions.

IV. Observations

32. I note with concern the serious violations of the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces that occurred on 27 and 28 November 2016 and on 8 February 2017. I am concerned that incidents of spillover, if left unchecked, could escalate into a serious situation that could lead to direct military action between the parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. As previously reported by UNDOF, the Israel Defense Forces hold the Syrian Government responsible for any spillover fire incidents to the Alpha side, regardless of the point of origin of the fire. The reported significant airstrikes by the Israel Defense Forces on 27 and 28 November against the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army appeared designed to deter such attacks on its personnel. It is disappointing that a further incident

occurred on 8 February, with the Israel Defense Forces firing across the ceasefire line in response to alleged spillover fire. It remains critical that the parties maintain their liaison with UNDOF in the first instance to prevent any escalation of the situation across the ceasefire line. It is not acceptable for UNDOF to be reliant on open sources to determine the extent of a deliberate violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. For its part, the United Nations will maintain its efforts to ensure that the long-standing ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic continues to hold.

33. I remain gravely concerned by the continuing deterioration of the security situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, its impact on the Syrian population and its implications for the stability of the wider region. The continued fighting on the Bravo side between the Syrian armed forces and armed groups, and between different armed groups, including listed terrorist groups such as Nusrah Front and ISIL affiliates such as the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, in the southern part of the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side, as well as the firing of missiles by the Israel Defense Forces across the ceasefire line, jeopardize the long-term ceasefire between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic and continue to significantly affect the UNDOF area of operation.

34. The presence of the Syrian armed forces and unauthorized military equipment in the area of separation are violations of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement. The increased use of heavy weapons by the Syrian armed forces and armed groups in the continuing Syrian conflict is disturbing and remains the single largest impediment to the successful implementation of the UNDOF mandate. I note that, while the reduction in the levels of firing continues in the northern part of the UNDOF area of operation, listed terrorist groups and other armed groups continue to maintain control over significant sections of the areas of separation and limitation in the UNDOF area of operation. The established crossing between the Alpha and Bravo sides remains closed.

35. There should be no military forces in the area of separation other than those of UNDOF. I call upon all parties to the Syrian conflict to cease military actions throughout the country, including in the UNDOF area of operation, and to remove all military equipment and all armed personnel from the area of separation.

36. The Israel Defense Forces should refrain from firing across the ceasefire line. The firing of missiles across the ceasefire line by the Israel Defense Forces has the potential to escalate tensions between the two sides. The continued presence of unauthorized weapons and equipment in the area of limitation on the Alpha side is also of concern.

37. Interaction between the Israel Defense Forces and unidentified individuals from the Bravo side, including in the area of Mount Hermon, is worrying, particularly as such interaction has the potential to lead to clashes between armed elements and the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. I reiterate my call to both parties to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement regarding the requirement to maintain stability in the area. All military activities in the area of separation conducted by any actor pose a risk to the ceasefire and to the local civilian population, in addition to the United Nations personnel on the ground. I call upon all parties to take all measures necessary to protect civilians.

38. As UNDOF consolidates its presence at Camp Faouar and continues its efforts to intensify its operations in the area of separation, it remains critical that the safety and security of United Nations personnel be assured. The circumstances under which the troops and military observers are operating remain complex and challenging and require continued vigilance and risk mitigation measures. I renew my call on the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to fulfil its primary responsibility for the safety and security of United Nations personnel in the areas of separation and limitation on the Bravo side. I also renew my call on countries with influence to strongly and urgently convey to the armed groups in the UNDOF area of operation the need to cease any actions in violation of the Disengagement of Forces Agreement that jeopardize the safety and security of United Nations personnel and to accord United Nations personnel the freedom to carry out their clear and important mandate safely and securely. The safety and security of United Nations personnel must be ensured.

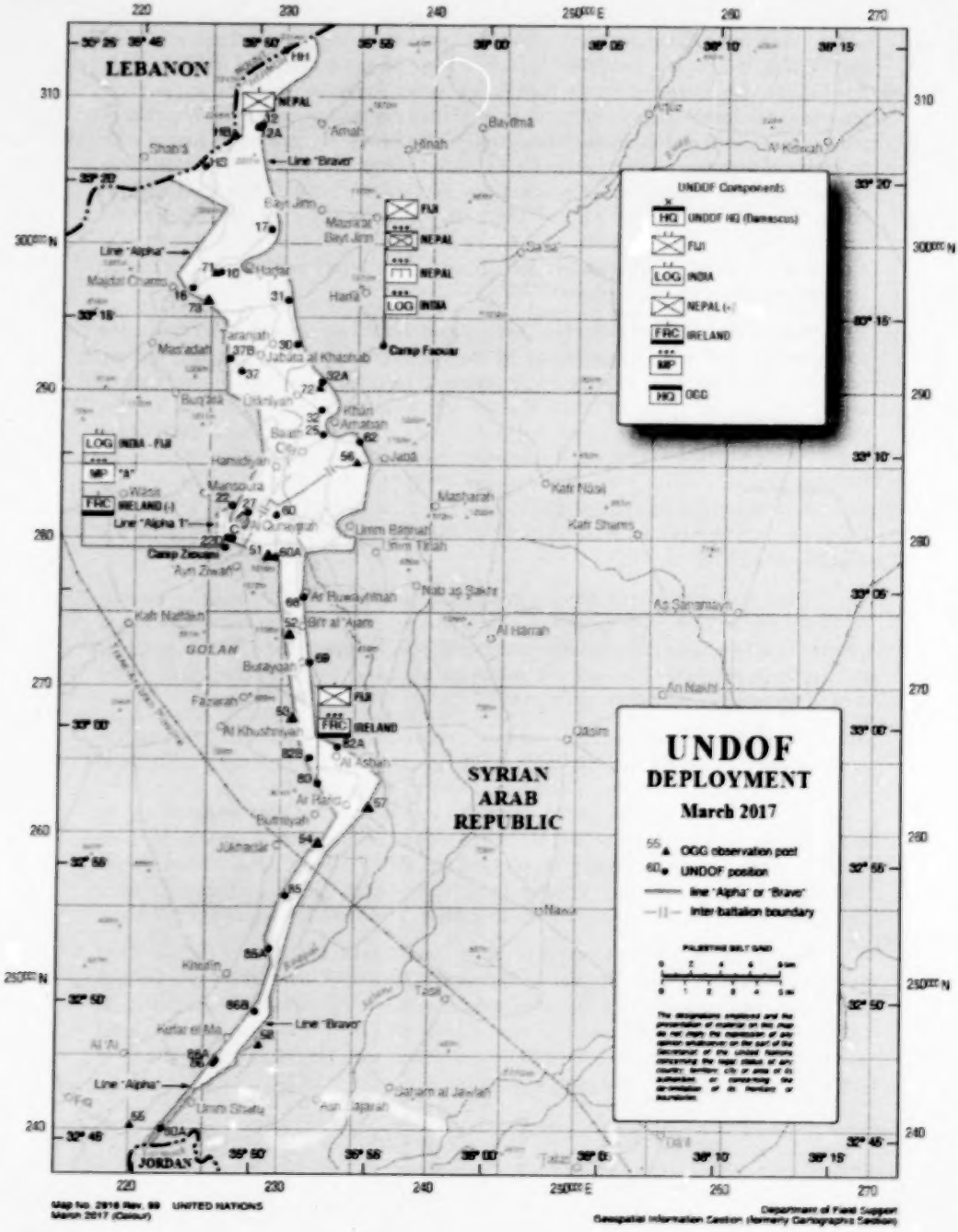
39. Both Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic have stated their continued commitment to the Disengagement of Forces Agreement and support for the presence of UNDOF in calling for a return to vacated positions in the area of separation. The full return of UNDOF to the area of separation remains a priority for the Mission. I count on the continued cooperation of both parties with UNDOF in order for the Mission to advance its planning. As a matter of priority, the technology and equipment necessary to enhance the UNDOF observation of the area of separation and the ceasefire line and to improve force protection remain critical. At the same time, the parties must continue to support the enhancement of the liaison function of UNDOF.

40. It is equally important that the Security Council continue to bring to bear its influence on the parties concerned to ensure that UNDOF is accorded the ability to operate in a safe and secure manner and freely. It is essential that UNDOF continue to have at its disposal all means and resources necessary for it to return fully to the area of separation, conditions permitting.

41. The confidence and commitment of troop-contributing countries in UNDOF remains a key factor for the Mission's ability to carry out its mandate. I continue to count on the support of troop-contributing countries as UNDOF proceeds with its planning, including in relation to the augmentation of required capabilities, in preparation for the envisaged increased operations in the area of separation. I am grateful to the Governments of Bhutan, Czechia, Fiji, Finland, India, Ireland, Nepal and the Netherlands for their contributions, their commitment and their resolve. I am also thankful to the Member States contributing military observers to UNTSO.

42. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to the Head of Mission and Force Commander, Major General Jai Shanker Menon, and the military and civilian personnel serving under his leadership, who continue to perform the important tasks assigned to them by the Security Council with efficiency and commitment under challenging circumstances. I have full confidence that UNDOF will continue to employ its best efforts to carry out its mission.

Annex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UNDOF
DEPLOYMENT
March 2017
OGG observation post
UNDOF position
line "Alpha" or "Brave"
inter-battalion boundary
Line "Alpha"
Line "Brave"
Camp Faouar
Camp Ziouani
Map No. 2916 Rev. 99 UNITED NATIONS
March 2017 (Colour)
Department of Field Support
Geospatial Information Section (formerly Cartographic Section)